



Robert W. Thomson during his tenure as Director of Dumbarton Oaks. Photo courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Archives.

Robert William Thomson

1934–2018

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The last sixty years have witnessed a transformation in the field of Armenian studies, as scholars from a wide range of disciplines have come to appreciate and engage with the rich canon of medieval Armenian literature. Although he would have been loath to acknowledge it, Robert William Thomson, fourth Director of Dumbarton Oaks, inaugural Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University between 1969 and 1992, and Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of Oxford between 1992 and 2001, was one of the principal architects behind this transformation. It is primarily as a result of his painstaking research and extraordinary publication record that so many medieval Armenian compositions—historical, theological, exegetical, hagiographical, philosophical, cosmographical—are now available and accessible in English for present and future generations to discover for themselves. While the works themselves will always be open to fresh interpretations and methodologies, his annotated translations and meticulous commentaries will remain at the heart of the field for many generations to come. A complete list of Robert Thomson's publications is available as an online supplement.¹ Thomson died on 20 November 2018 in hospital in Oxford of complications following a stroke sustained eleven days earlier.

Robert Thomson was born in London in 1934 but moved to Bournemouth on the south coast of England

following the outbreak of war in 1939 and then to Edinburgh, where he was educated at George Watson's College. He studied Classics at the University of Cambridge, but before embarking on doctoral research, he spent a year at one of the last remaining Greek educational institutions in Istanbul, the Halki Theological School; this was closed in 1971 and remains so today. It was then a seminary with adjoining school and library, in a building on the site of a monastery originally founded by patriarch Photios; there, Thomson was able to meet with a wide variety of people and begin his long-standing association with projects in Turkey. In the course of his time in Istanbul, he climbed up onto the roof of Hagia Sophia, describing the passageway underneath the dome as "terrifying." He also traveled extensively in eastern Turkey. Returning to Cambridge, Thomson began his doctoral research under the supervision of Robert Casey on Syriac, and later Armenian, versions of works associated with Athanasius of Alexandria. He continued to visit Turkey during summer vacations and assisted in cleaning the frescoes of Hagia Sophia in Trebizond under the direction of David Talbot Rice, then professor of Byzantine art at the University of Edinburgh, whom he had met socially. Trebizond had another role in Robert's career, for it was here, several years later, that he met Giles Constable, quite by chance; as a result of Thomson's fluency in Turkish, they traveled together, visiting the ancient city of Ani and other Armenian sites. Constable, by then professor at Harvard, would in turn serve as the third

1 https://archive.org/details/DOP77_suppl_Greenwood.

Director of Dumbarton Oaks, appointing Thomson as a senior fellow in 1979.

Thomson's visits to Turkey as a doctoral student also proved to be formative in another respect. It was when traveling to Turkey in 1958 that Thomson stopped off in Vienna and first began to study classical Armenian with Father Nerses Akinean in the Armenian Mechitarist monastery. His knowledge of Armenian developed further on his return under the direction of Charles Dowsett, then lecturer in Armenian at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. It was also at this time that Thomson began to learn Arabic with Edmund Bosworth, who had been appointed in 1957 to a lectureship in Arabic at the University of St Andrews. Thomson's father had accepted a ministerial appointment in the Church of Scotland in St Andrews and moved the family from Edinburgh. Therefore, when Thomson was appointed to a junior fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks in 1960–61 to finish his thesis, his remarkable talent for languages was already apparent.

In Thomson's own telling, that junior fellow year was a pivotal moment. While he was at Dumbarton Oaks, living in the close quarters of the then-Fellows' Building, he had the chance to converse with numerous scholars also resident or visiting there: the director at the time, Ernst Kitzinger, Ihor Ševčenko, Romilly Jenkins, André Grabar, and Milton Anastos. But perhaps most crucially, Sirarpie Der Nersessian, the first professor of Byzantine art and archaeology at Harvard, twice senior fellow at Dumbarton Oaks, and noted Armenian art historian, encouraged him to pursue various Armenian themes; indeed, Thomson later described her as the person who was most influential in his career. Thomson also met regularly with Irfan Shahîd, assisting him with reading passages in Syriac in exchange for reading passages together in Arabic. Toward the end of his fellowship, and with the encouragement of Der Nersessian, Thomson traveled to Harvard. There he met several friends of his former supervisor—Casey had died in 1959—as well as the chair of the Near Eastern Languages Department. At the time, efforts were underway at Harvard to establish a position in Armenian studies with the support and backing of the Armenian community in Cambridge and the Boston area. The chair suggested that Thomson should undertake a year of postgraduate study with Professor Gérard Garitte at the University of Louvain in Belgium, after which he would be appointed to a three-year

instructorship in Armenian at Harvard. It was therefore in these circumstances, before Thomson had yet defended his doctoral thesis, that he was appointed to his first academic position at Harvard. This association would last thirty years.

In 1961, Thomson traveled to Louvain. There he obtained a license in three Christian Oriental languages: Armenian, Arabic, and Georgian. He had intended to offer Syriac but the Syriac instructor knew, through Casey, that Thomson had already mastered Syriac and insisted he take Georgian instead. Thus Thomson acquired another language that proved to be influential in his subsequent research. The other member of Garitte's Armenian and Georgian classes that year was the renowned Bollandist scholar Michel van Esbroeck, and one can only imagine the level of debate during their meetings. The influence of Garitte on both was profound and can be traced in their respective scholarly careers. The following year saw the first fruits of Thomson's scholarship with the publication of two articles, one on an eighth-century Melkite colophon from Edessa, the other a study of the office of *vardapet* in the Armenian Church.² The first emerged from his doctoral research into the Syriac Athanasian corpus, the second from sustained engagement with a wide range of Armenian texts. From the very beginning, therefore, Thomson's publications attest his linguistic breadth and scholarly depth and these would characterize his scholarship across the next six decades. In the same year, Thomson married Judith, and each of his books would be dedicated to her, with one exception dedicated to their two children, Jasper and Crispin.

From 1963, Thomson was based at Harvard, initially as instructor in Armenian, and then from 1969 as Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies. His presence there was the result of a cooperation between the Armenian community of the Boston area and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard. The chair was established through the efforts of the Boston-area branch of the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research responding to the suggestion of Richard Frye, then professor of Iranian studies at Harvard, that Armenian studies should be conducted and made public more broadly in the United States

2 "An Eighth-Century Melkite Colophon from Edessa," *JTS* 13.2 (1962): 249–58; "Vardapet in the Early Armenian Church," *Muséon* 75 (1962): 367–84.

through the establishment of chairs by the donation of community organizations. Once NAASR had raised sufficient funds, it was possible for Thomson to become its first occupant and devote the majority of his scholarly attention to Armenian studies, concentrating on historiography, literature, and language.

In 1965, the first of four substantial volumes entitled *Athanasiana Syriaca* appeared in the CSCO series; the last was published in 1977.³ These were the fruits of his doctoral research. Yet as has been noted above, Thomson's research interests had already shifted into the field of Armenian studies. His first period of tenure at Harvard coincided with the publication of several ground-breaking works: his translation and extensive literary analysis of the catechetical *Teaching of Saint Gregory*;⁴ Agathangelos's *History of the Armenians*;⁵ Moses Khorenats'i's *History of the Armenians*;⁶ and Elishe's *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*;⁷ and two language primers: *An Introduction to Classical Armenian*;⁸ and, with Kevork Bardakjian, *A Textbook of Modern Western Armenian*.⁹ If the wonderfully accurate translations and insightful commentaries opened up the works of medieval Armenian historical writing for wider scholarly appreciation, his introductory guides to Classical and Western Armenian answered the need for effective language teaching aids. Countless students will have encountered the mysteries of vocalic alternation through the opening pages of Thomson's *Introduction to Classical Armenian* and it remains the fundamental starting point five decades later.

3 *Athanasius Syriaca*, vol. 1, *De Incarnatione; Epistula ad Epictetum*, CSCO Scriptorum Syri 114, 115 (Leuven, 1965); *Athanasiana Syriaca*, vol. 2, *Homily on Matthew 12, 32; Epistola ad Afros; Tomus ad Antiochenos; Epistola ad Maximum; Epistola ad Adelphium*, CSCO Scriptorum Syri 118, 119 (Leuven, 1967); *Athanasiana Syriaca*, vol. 3, *De incarnatione contra Arianos; Contra Apollinarium I; De Cruce et Passione; Quod unus sit Christus; De Incarnatione Dei Verbi; Ad Jovianum*, CSCO Scriptorum Syri 142, 143 (Leuven, 1972); *Athanasiana Syriaca*, vol. 4, *Expositio in Psalmos*, CSCO Scriptorum Syri 167, 168 (Leuven, 1977).

4 *The Teaching of Saint Gregory: An Early Armenian Catechism*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 3 (Cambridge, MA, 1970).

5 *History of the Armenians* (Albany, NY, 1976).

6 *History of the Armenians*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 4 (Cambridge, MA, 1978).

7 *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 5 (Harvard, MA, 1982).

8 *An Introduction to Classical Armenian* (Delmar, NY, 1975).

9 *A Textbook of Modern Western Armenian* (Delmar, NY, 1977).

In the spring term of 1977, at the invitation of another Dumbarton Oaks colleague, Byzantine historian Walter Kaegi, Thomson took up a visiting professorship in Armenian Studies at the University of Chicago. In the Oriental Institute there, he offered an introduction to the ancient Armenian language and an introduction to the study of classical Armenian literature. Since during that time he was also translating Moses Khorenats'i's *History*, he chose to give a public lecture on the topic. That chronicle, cherished in the Armenian community and long believed to date from the fifth century and to be the first history of the Armenian people, Thomson had convincingly demonstrated in its current form to be an eighth-century composition. A vigorous question-and-answer session followed, and Thomson relished the exchange as he expatiated on his conclusions. Graduate students present at the exchange remember Thomson's consummate skill as a lecturer and his evident appreciation of the subsequent discussion.

Thomson was appointed as senior fellow of Dumbarton Oaks for Byzantine Studies in 1979 and renewed his ties with the institution. He helped to convene the spring symposium of 1980 under the title "East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia." It concentrated upon the history and literature of these adjacent yet distinct regions. The volume of the proceedings, which appeared two years later, contains contributions from the most prominent scholars then active in these disciplines, drawing attention to cultural production in regions variously within and beyond Byzantium and the mutual processes of interaction and exchange.¹⁰ It is recognized as one of the field-changing volumes of the era.

Several years later, Derek Bok, then president of Harvard, invited Thomson to become director of Dumbarton Oaks. He agreed to serve as director for a five-year period and returned in 1984, in succession to Giles Constable. Thomson was an energetic director. He was involved in all the business of the institution, overseeing the three programs and reporting periodically to the president of Harvard, but also planning parties and suggesting music for concerts offered in the Music Room. As director of a well-established Washington institution, he occasionally met as well

10 N. G. Garsoïan, T. F. Mathews, and R. W. Thomson, eds., *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington, DC, 1982).

with directors of other scholarly institutions and museums in the city. He was interested, by his own account, both in sponsoring the work of individual scholars who sought the quiet and the specialized library of Dumbarton Oaks and also in the more public direction of the institution itself, which had turned from its earlier interest in archaeological investigations to the production of numerous scholarly volumes and, in those years, the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* as well as the wider promotion of Byzantine studies in universities.

Yet Thomson did not cease to be a teacher when he came down from Harvard to be the director of Dumbarton Oaks. Importantly, every year he offered courses in Armenian or Georgian to local students and scholars who wanted to learn those languages. Every Thursday afternoon, in the Study, Thomson taught the languages with blackboard and chalk to those students who wanted to learn them, patiently explaining terms and expressions or diagramming the complex sentences beloved of early Armenian writers. He based his instruction upon his *Introduction*, supplemented with the more detailed works of Hübschmann and Meillet, and as students became more proficient, he would assign long texts for translation and reading in class. As he said in a different context, he was “no revolutionary” when it came to language instruction. He taught Armenian as a philologist, and encouraged his students to lay a solid foundation of grammar and vocabulary before setting sail into the waters of classical Armenian texts. There seemed to be no grammatical construction or Armenian expression he did not know, and he would gladly expatiate upon them all in a simultaneously crisp, business-like, and generous manner. Any question proposed to him in class would yield an answer that was both clear and detailed. He welcomed consultation in his office nearby—an office that was itself a library, the shelves of which revealed a lifetime of collecting and arranging the books and periodicals crucial for his research. If a particular study was proposed to him by a younger scholar, he would answer, “There! Now you have your project!” Numerous students came from the Catholic University of America, and in particular from the Department of Semitic Languages and Literature; some of these students went on themselves to pursue careers that would either be focused upon or otherwise include the study of the Armenian language and its texts.

At the same time, even while directing operations at Dumbarton Oaks, Thomson continued his scholarship

at his customary speed, attending conferences, publishing regularly and evidently beginning new work that was published after he returned to Harvard. Along with articles, he also worked on the Armenian translation of the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, in two volumes, and the *History* of Thomas Artsruni both of which were published while he was director, and had already started translating the historical works by Vardan Arewelts'i, the Anonymous Storyteller, and Lazar P'arpets'i, all of which appeared shortly after he concluded his tenure at Dumbarton Oaks.¹¹ It remains unclear where Thomson found the time to serve as Director, teach the language and conduct his own research but his own reminiscence of walking in the grounds before the gardeners had arrived implies a regime of very early mornings.

In 1992, Thomson returned to England, having accepted the position of Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of Oxford, in succession to Dowsett. He held this position until his retirement in 2001. In addition to serving as Chair of the Faculty, Thomson continued to teach Classical Armenian and Georgian, both to students admitted onto dedicated Master's programs and those who wished to learn the languages. The style of teaching remained the same: careful explanation, increasing sophistication and then long passages to be read aloud, followed by translation and comment on individual points of grammar, now using a whiteboard and marker pen. In the meantime, he maintained his remarkable rhythm of publication. If any pattern can be detected in these years, it is a broadening of his vision of enquiry. On the one hand, he published a much-valued translation of *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebēos*, with accompanying historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston;¹² the significance of this work for the study of the first half of the seventh century, the emergence of Islam, and the Arab-Islamic conquests is now firmly established. He also translated the Georgian Chronicles, both in their original form (in Georgian)

11 *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite*, CSCSO Scriptores Armeniaci 17, 18 (Leuven, 1987); *History of the House of the Artsrunik*, Byzantine Texts in Translation (Detroit, 1985); “The Historical Compilation of Vardan Arewelts'i,” *DOP* 43 (1989): 125–226 “The Anonymous Story-Teller (Also Known as ‘Pseudo-Šapuh’),” *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 21 (1988/89): 171–232; *The History of Lazar P'arpets'i* (Atlanta, 1991).

12 *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebēos*, TTH 31 (Liverpool, 1999).

and in an adapted version (in Armenian).¹³ On the other hand, he produced an edition and translation of the Syriac version of the *Hexaemeron* by Basil of Caesarea,¹⁴ and this would be followed by a translation of the Armenian version.¹⁵ A third strand of research comprised a renewed engagement with homiletic and exegetical texts, although at this stage it was largely confined to articles. And in a further invaluable contribution to Armenian studies, in 1995 he published *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD*; together with its 2007 supplement, this constitutes the first point of reference for the study of any pre-modern Armenian work, whether translation or original composition.¹⁶ This was generated from his own systematic card catalogue that he continued to update throughout his career.

Retirement brought no let-up in the pace of publication. Thomson remarked that the only thing that changed on retirement was that he could now read the morning papers at a more leisurely pace. The decade following his retirement saw a gradual reorientation away from historical literature and toward exegetical and homiletic material. His translations of the Armenian adaptation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus and the Armenian versions of the *Life of Sylvester* would be the final new historical translations,¹⁷ although he returned to his first publications and produced revised editions of the *Teaching of Saint Gregory* and Moses Khorenats'i's *History*.¹⁸ When revisiting Agathangelos's *History*, however, Thomson did far more than prepare a revised edition. *The Lives of Saint Gregory* offers an extended study of the subsequent

development of this composition across different versions in multiple languages and then supplies intercalated translations of the Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac versions.¹⁹ One suspects that only Thomson was capable of producing this volume. He drew upon the important contributions of Garitte and van Esbroeck for the study of this complex body of traditions, and although he does not say as much, in many ways this volume stands as a testament to their shared language classes almost fifty years before.

In 2000, Thomson had published *A Homily on the Passion of Christ Attributed to Elishe*,²⁰ and this marked a renewed engagement with Armenian homiletic and especially exegetical works. In 2005, his edition, translation, and study of the ninth-century Hamam's *Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* appeared,²¹ followed shortly after by his translation and study of Nersēs of Lambron's *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*²² and the ninth-century Nonnus of Nisibis's *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*.²³ An edition, translation, and commentary of Nersēs of Lambron's little-studied *Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John* appeared in 2017.²⁴ By this time, Thomson had already been working for several years on Vardan Arewelts'i's vast *Commentary on the Psalms* and this research was approaching its conclusion at the time of his death; he sent a copy to the series' editor for comment on 6 November 2018, just three days before his stroke. Thomson always intended this would be his last major work; in correspondence he referred to it as his "chant du cygne"; to his family it was simply his "opus." This is presently in the final stages of preparation. A Biblical commentary prepared by a thirteenth-century

13 *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles* (Oxford, 1996).

14 *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea*, CSCO Scriptores Syri 222, 223 (Leuven, 1995).

15 *Saint Basil of Caesarea and Armenian Cosmology: A Study of the Armenian Version of Saint Basil's Hexaemeron and Its Influence on Medieval Armenian Views about the Cosmos*, CSCO Subsidia 130 (Leuven, 2012).

16 *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD* (Turnhout, 1995); "Supplement to *A Bibliography of Classical Armenian Literature to 1500 AD*: Publications 1993–2005," *Muséon* 120 (2007): 163–223.

17 *The Armenian Adaptation of the Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*, Hebrew University Armenian Studies 3 (Leuven, 2001);

18 *The Teaching of Saint Gregory*, rev. ed. (New Rochelle, NY, 2001); *History of the Armenians*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006).

19 *The Lives of Saint Gregory: The Armenian, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac Versions of the History Attributed to Agathangelos* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010); "The Armenian Versions of the Life of Sylvester," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 14 (2005): 55–139.

20 *A Homily on the Passion of Christ Attributed to Elishe*, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 5 (Leuven, 2000).

21 *Hamam: Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, Hebrew University Armenian Studies 5 (Leuven, 2005).

22 *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*, Hebrew University Armenian Studies 9 (Leuven, 2007).

23 *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, Writings from the Islamic World 1 (Atlanta, 2014).

24 *Nersēs of Lambron: Commentary on the Dormition of Saint John*, University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 1 (Leiden, 2017).

Armenian scholar better known for his historical composition—there could scarcely be a more appropriate choice for Thomson’s final scholarly contribution.

Although Thomson usually worked alone, he was always generous in recognizing the contributions of others. He was also willing to collaborate with others. Three of his books were co-authored: with Kevork Bardakjian, *A Textbook of Modern Western Armenian*; with Bridget Kendall, *David the Invincible Philosopher: Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy*;²⁵ and with James Howard-Johnston, the *History Attributed to Sebēos*. Thomson was also keenly aware of the importance of collective academic institutions for fostering scholarly conversations, connections, and publications. In 1974, alongside Richard Hovannisian, Dickran Kouymjian, Nina Garsoïan, and Avedis Sanjian, he was one of the founder members of the Society for Armenian Studies and served on its board and the editorial board of its journal. He was a patron member of the Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes, serving on its committee and the Conseil Scientifique of the *Revue des Études Arméniennes*. In addition to his service at Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard, and Oxford, and the many conferences he convened or participated in across six decades—invariably accompanied by Judith—Thomson established and perpetuated the institutional framework within which the discipline of Armenian studies operates on both sides of the Atlantic today. It is particularly fitting that at the direction of his family, Thomson’s working library should have made a final journey across the Atlantic to a permanent home at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, where it will be consulted by future generations of scholars.

Thomson received many distinctions for his contributions to Armenian studies. In 1995 he was elected

a fellow of the British Academy. He received the Saint Sahak and Saint Mesrop Medal from the Catholicos of All Armenians, Vazgen I, “for his great service to the scholarly study of the history of the Armenian people.” Such honors do not, however, do full justice to his nature. His deep learning was coupled with a sincere interest in, and commitment to, the scholarship of others. This was appreciated by the many colleagues and students from around the world who received a kind word or suggestion for future direction. Although naturally reserved, Thomson very much enjoyed being in company, listening to others and offering his thoughts, not as the world-famous Armenian scholar but as an interested and often amusing colleague, companion, and friend. Over the course of sixty years, Dumbarton Oaks, with its combination of scholarship and sociability, proved to be an ideal location for Robert to pursue his own research and shape the discipline for generations to come. In everything, he was supported by his wife, Judith, who survives him, along with his two sons and two grandchildren.

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25 *David the Invincible Philosopher: Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy. English Translation of the Old Armenian Version with Introduction and Notes*, University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 5 (Chico, CA, 1983).